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Developmental Differences in Children's Perception of Maternal Socialization Behavior

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APPEL, YETTA H. *Developmental Differences in Children's Perception of Maternal Socialization Behavior*. CHILD DEVELOPMENT, 1977, 48, 1689–1693. This study explored developmental differences in children's perception of maternal socialization behavior based on Piaget's developmental psychology. It was hypothesized that children at the preoperational stage of development would prefer an essentially permissive mother rather than one who attempts to socialize, when compared with concrete operational children. 60 kindergarten children and 70 third graders, matched on ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and intactness of mother-child relationship, equally divided as to sex, were interviewed with a story inventory. Statistically significant developmental differences were found (but no sex differences) in that the younger children evaluated the permissive mother positively, while the older children were consistently negative.

Utilizing the developmental psychology of Jean Piaget as the theoretical framework, this study investigated developmental differences in children's perception and evaluation of maternal socialization behavior. It seems altogether appropriate that children's conceptions of their personal world should change as a function of their growing maturity and experience as do their conceptions of the physical world. Although Piaget has not focused on the personal-social area as consistently in his later work, it certainly is evident in *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (1962) in which he investigated the developmental progression in children's exercise of moral judgment.

It was hypothesized that, from the child's point of view, maternal care was likely to be perceived as an amalgam of maternal affection-warmth and maternal efforts at socialization but with the likelihood that the mother's need to exercise control would be differentially evaluated as a function of the child's stage of intellectual development. The study focused on the developmental changes that may occur in the child's evaluation of his mother's handling of him on the assumption that such changes may be determined by the degree to which the child is able to grasp the intent of the mother's behavior. For example, a 2-year-old's response to the mother's limiting his personal aggression toward others might be rage; at 5 years, the child may be more ready to accept this limit for he may have a rudimentary

awareness of its being related to his having playmates; but at 8 years, the child may be able to inhibit himself, having "internalized" the basis for his mother's limits against aggression or, if reprimanded, may respond with relatively little anger, essentially expecting her to limit him.

This process can be conceptualized in terms of an identification paradigm utilizing psychoanalytic theory, or alternatively from the viewpoint of learning theory, but it also involves a changing perception of the basis for the mother's behavior. The mother's standards have to be perceived and assimilated by the child over time, and he has to accommodate himself progressively to them to internalize them to the extent that they will increasingly guide his behavior in the absence of external restraints. What has to be "conserved" in this instance is not matter, length, or volume as in Piaget's classic experiments but the essential intent of the mother's limits on the child's personal aggression.

Yet, from Piagetian theory one can hypothesize that this would be as difficult for the child to accomplish until the egocentrism which appears to dominate the child's thought processes in the preoperational stage diminishes. The significant development, according to Piaget (1962, pp. 189–190), is the discovery of intentionality coincident with the attainment of the stage of concrete operations. Until this occurs, the child's grasp of the "system of re-

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lationships" apparently governing the imposition of social constraints by adults will tend to be inadequate.

The child-rearing literature makes it abundantly evident that children face formidable intellectual tasks in the process of socialization (see, e.g., Blitsten 1971; Brown 1965; Piaget 1954; Wann, Dorn, & Liddle 1962). It is also evident that there has been relatively little investigation of developmental differences in children's perception of parental child-rearing behavior (Dubin & Dubin 1965).

The sex of the child, class and ethnic status, and the child's birth order have all been found to influence socialization practices (Sears, Maccoby, & Levin 1957). Since the major focus of the research was the identification of developmental changes in the child's evaluation of maternal socialization behavior, it was deemed essential to control for ethnicity and class status. Although maternal socialization practices are influenced by ordinality, there appears to be almost no research with children regarding the differential perception of maternal behavior and/or attributes as a function of the child's birth order. Because ordinality appears to be a consequential variable, its effect, as well as that of sex and age, was systematically examined.

Maternal socialization behavior in this study refers to early infant training as well as the induction of the child into the complex world of social relationships, and inevitably involves the exercise of authority by the mother (Clausen 1968, pp. 139-140; Yarrow 1963). Indeed, for the developing, dependent child whose needs and impulses tend to be so imperative in the early formative years, the nature of the mother's control may be as significant as the degree of her warmth or nurturance. Thus, it was hypothesized that maternal control would be an integral part of a child's operational definition of maternal care.

The basic hypothesis tested in the study was that the preoperational child, unable as yet to decenter, lacking an integrated conception of good maternal care which incorporates the mother's need to socialize, and with an inadequate grasp of the psychological variable of intentionality, would be likely to prefer an essentially permissive mother in contrast to the

child at the concrete operational stage of intelligence. It was thought that the child at the preoperational stage would not be likely to have a dominant schema of adequate maternal care which incorporated the mother's need to socialize. The child at the concrete operational stage, on the other hand, responding less egocentrically and with more understanding of the basis for the mother's restraints, might be unable to conceive of a nonsocializing mother. Hence it seemed indicated to depict a highly permissive mother who made *no* attempt to socialize her boy or girl.

Age, rather than the child's sex and birth order, was expected to account primarily for the differential evaluation of the mother's socialization function. With regard to sex, the boys' and girls' judgments of the permissive mother were compared. Firstborn, middle born, and last born children also were compared, and then this was assessed controlling for the age of the child because within their respective stages of development firstborn children might respond more maturely, in view of differential parental expectations regarding their achievement of social maturity (see, e.g., Clausen 1966).

Although it was planned to assess the effect of differences in level of intelligence, this could not be done since intelligence test data were not available for both age samples. It was possible to obtain reading scores¹ for the concrete operational age sample. These were utilized to trichotomize the sample into low, middle, and high scoring groups. The hypothesis tested was that the high scoring group, to a significant degree, would have a more objective view of the mother's socialization function.

Method

Sample.—The metropolitan area public school chosen for the study was predominantly white and middle class, which background data secured from the parents confirmed. The consequential variables on which the two age samples, totaling 130 children, were matched were socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and intactness of mother-child relationship. Sixty kindergarten children, who would be functioning at the preoperational level according to Piaget,

¹ The reading scores for the third graders were not secured until their interviews were completed, in order to control for the possible influence on the investigator of knowledge of a child's score.

were randomly selected from 119 eligible children, after the group was stratified by sex, or 30 boys and 30 girls who ranged in age from 5.0 to 6.2 years. Seventy third graders, who could be presumed to have attained the stage of concrete operations, were also randomly selected from a total of 80 children, similarly stratified by sex, or 35 boys and 35 girls ranging in age from 8.0 to 10.0 years.

Construction and administration of inventory.—Fairly typical maternal socialization demands children ordinarily confronted in their daily life experience became the basis for the inventory and were subsumed into five socialization dimensions. These dimensions (exercise of social control, fostering independence, fostering social skills, exercise of protective care, and reduced readiness of response) were exemplified through stories, two for each dimension, similar to Piaget's approach in his early studies. The matched stories, for example, for the *exercise of social control* dimension has the mother in the first story allowing the child to splash children at the beach, and in the second she allows her child to continue playing with a friend's toy when the friend wants it back. All of the other eight stories similarly portray a highly permissive mother. A girl's version and a boy's version were developed to facilitate identification by both sexes.

The children were told that the study was about how mothers take care of children and that stories would be read to them about how a boy's (girl's) mother does things with the child. Following the reading of each story, the child was asked to evaluate the mother's permissive behavior in terms of a "good-not good" dichotomy, although the possibility of designating the mother as "both" was not precluded. The children were further asked to explain the basis for their evaluation, in order to test the child's understanding of the story as well as the reliability of the evaluation of the permissive mother. All of the children's interviews were tape-recorded.

Controlling for response set for the matched stories.—Presenting the 10 stories in a random order to each of the 130 children was considered at first to control for the possible development of a response set. But in randomizing all of the 10 stories, it was quite possible that two of the matched stories for a particular dimension might occur successively, or be separated by only one story representing another dimension. To reduce this pos-

sibility, it was decided to present the two matched stories at a fixed interval by reading the child all of the "first" stories (arbitrarily designated first by the investigator) for each of the five dimensions, followed by the five "second" stories for the respective dimensions.

Since a collection of five items can be ordered in 120 different combinations, this was applied to the first set of stories, designated set 1. The 120 possible orderings derived from the permutations determined the order of presentation of the stories comprising set 1, and by maintaining the fixed interval described above, also determined the order for the stories in set 2. Thus if a child heard the first story of a particular dimension in the "third" position, he would hear the second matched story for that dimension in the "eighth" position.

The particular ordering assigned to each child was determined by his randomly established interview order. Since there were a total of 130 children and only 120 possible orderings, the first 10 orderings were repeated for the last 10 children interviewed. The two age samples also were interviewed concurrently, which resulted in approximately the same number of children in the two age samples hearing the matched stories for each of the five dimensions in the five possible positions.

Development of socialization index.—A socialization index was developed by scoring as 0, or "immature," the designation of the permissive mother as "good" in each of the stories, and a score of 1, or "mature," was assigned to the evaluation of the mother as "not good." If the mother was designated as "both," this was given a score of $\frac{1}{2}$. The child's scores for all of the stories were added to secure his socialization index score, with a possible range of scores from 0 to 10. The internal consistency of this index was measured with Kuder-Richardson Formula 20. A reliability coefficient of .80 was obtained, attesting to its considerable internal consistency.

By utilizing the upper limit of the interval in which the median of the distribution of the scores fell, the total sample was dichotomized into "immature" and "mature" scoring groups. The difference between these groups was tested by χ^2 .

Results

Age-stage differences.—The mean of the socialization index scores for the total group,

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$N = 130$, was 5.1 with a standard deviation of 3.30. The median score was 6.0. Only one kindergarten child achieved an index score of 10, and only one third grader had an index score of 0. Table 1 gives the results which indicate that the difference between the two age groups was significant at $p < .001$.

Sex and birth-order differences.—As hypothesized, sex differences were not found across the developmental stages. Piaget's findings regarding the minimal influence of the child's sex on cognitive development appear to receive confirmation. Across age levels, first-born children did not differ significantly from later-born children in their evaluation of the mother's socialization function.²

When the socialization index scores for the three birth-order cohorts were assessed controlling for age, it was found that firstborn kindergarten-age children responded more maturely, $\chi^2(2) = 7.649$, $p < .05$. The hypothesis was only partially confirmed in view of the lack of comparable findings for the firstborn cohort of the third-grade-age sample. It may well be that the influence of birth order, like sex, is not continuously salient in the process of development. But unlike sex, it may become less significant as the child matures in view of the reduction in egocentrism of the third-grade-age children irrespective of ordinality.

Reading level of third-grade children.—As is evident in table 2, those children with the highest reading scores also had more mature socialization index scores. A relationship may exist between level of intelligence, as mea-

TABLE 2
SOCIALIZATION INDEX SCORES BY READING LEVEL
OF THIRD-GRADE CHILDREN

READING LEVEL ^a	N	SOCIALIZATION INDEX SCORE ^b		TOTAL (%)
		Imma- ture ^c	Mature ^d	
Low (2.7-3.9)	13	76.9	23.1	100
Middle (4.0-6.5)	43	51.2	48.8	100
High (6.6-8.9)	14	14.3	85.7	100

NOTE.— $\chi^2 = 10.887(2)$, $p < .01$.

^a Score of 3.9 indicates child is at grade level.

^b Scores dichotomized at median for third-grade-age sample, 8.0.

^c Scores of 0.0-7.5.

^d Scores of 8.0-10.0.

sured by a child's reading level, and the type of cognitive discrimination investigated in this study. This may hold also across developmental levels and may have contributed to the mature index scores achieved by some of the firstborn kindergarten children. Intellectual ability would seem to be one of a group of distinguishing characteristics which tend to affect the degree to which, or the rate at which, certain cognitive developmental accomplishments are attained.

Discussion

The statistically significant result obtained on the socialization index appears to confirm that the preoperational child generally lacks a conception of good maternal care which incorporates the mother's need to exercise control. A child at this stage of development appears to view his social relationships as egocentrically as he does the physical reality, with a marked tendency to evaluate interaction with others in terms of its contribution to his experience of satisfaction.

To add to the child's confusion, socialization tends to proceed incidentally rather than in a consciously programmed fashion. It then becomes the child's task to try to extract the implicit rule systems, as Brown (1965, p. 95) has noted. It is perhaps this aspect—that the child is regularly faced with having to extract from his ongoing life experiences the implicit codes governing social and personal behavior—which accords such significance to his cognitive development. With regard to

TABLE 1

SOCIALIZATION INDEX SCORES BY STAGE LEVEL

STAGE LEVEL	N	SOCIALIZATION INDEX SCORE ^a		TOTAL (%)
		Imma- ture ^b	Mature ^c	
Preoperational (5.0-6.2 years)	60	78.3	21.7	100
Concrete operational (8.0-10.0 years)	70	18.6	81.4	100

NOTE.— $\chi^2 = 46.429(1)$, $p < .001$.

^a Scores dichotomized at median for total sample, 6.0.

^b Scores of 0.0-5.5.

^c Scores of 6.0-10.0.

² There were four "only" children, one from the kindergarten group and three third graders, who were excluded when testing for the effect of birth order.

the child's perception of the parenting he receives, it would seem to be of importance to consider the nature of the child's cognitive framework at various stages in his development in order to determine the degree to which this affects his interpretation of parental care and to be able to specify eventually the developmental transformations which may occur.

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